

The Language of Cooperation: Negotiation Frames

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This discussion draws from the dramatistic perspective of Kenneth Burke to identify frames of interaction that parties bring to and negotiate in situations of conflict. The tragic frame and other problematic frames of relating are identified as they appear in mediation and negotiation. The discussion advocates the comic or hopeful frame as appropriate for working with complex conflicts and considers means of creating and sustaining the hopeful frame in conflict environments.

Our greatest body of observable social facts are not derived from what people do, but from what they say about what they do. . . . Words are data.

—Hugh Duncan, *Communication and Social Order*

The development of the field of conflict resolution in the past two decades brings us to a point where we are increasingly concerned with theoretical frameworks for conflict resolution processes and for ourselves as interpreters and practitioners. A number of perspectives offer significant insight into the process in which we engage and in the environment we attempt to create. A dramatistic, or “language as symbolic action” approach (Burke, 1969b), implies that our language affects the way we perceive, that the use of symbols implies choice, that human beings develop and present their communication in the form of a drama, and that a person’s worldview can be seen in his or her language.

From this perspective and from symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1959), and relational communication theory (Bateson, 1972, 1980; Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967), we also draw the understanding that one’s definition of self and of a situation arises through social interaction. Communication is transactive, so people, in their interaction, are always negotiating, in the broadest sense, such things as how they see themselves, how they see the other, how they view the situation, the relationship, and so forth. Additionally, the transaction brings about change in each

participant. (The term *negotiation* throughout this discussion will refer to this broader use rather than to the view of negotiation as being simply about the allocation of resources.)

The dramatistic perspective is important and applicable because it departs from the classic view of rhetoric as an ability to persuade using evidence, proof, dialectics, reason, and emotions. Kenneth Burke, a rhetorical theorist and literary critic, focuses on the use of language to achieve "identification," or to create a context in which persons can identify with each others' experience. People are, by substance, separate identities, divided from each other. They are consubstantial, or identified with each other, insofar as their interests are joined (Burke, 1969b). (The term *interests* is being used here and throughout this discussion to refer to a deep concept of interests as having psychological, procedural, and substantive dimensions [Moore, 1986], as well as dimensions deriving from identity, "face," and value bases.) To identify with each other's experience both requires and brings about acknowledgment of each other's humanity and completes the identity of each participant (Burke, 1969b, p. 23). (Identification is itself, of course, a form of persuasion, and the symbols of identification must always be examined.)

From a dramatistic perspective, people not only *can* make choices about their language, they are, by nature, actively involved in interpreting and naming their experience and responsible for the labels they choose to define a situation and to behave accordingly (Burke, 1959, 1969b). Such a perspective assumes that language is never neutral. Applying this perspective to mediation and negotiation, the terms *framing* and *reframing* become core concepts and have a broader significance in the overall mediation or negotiation process than they are often considered to hold. People choose language that helps them define a situation and thus provide a pattern for action. These patterns, or frames, are in a sense habits of the mind—strategies for living that people develop for living in a social and thus conflictual environment (Burke, 1959).

Often the patterns of relating, or the language frames, that people bring to negotiation are underdeveloped and limited. The frame may simply lack the capacity to deal with the complexity and depth of the conflict. Positive negotiation of conflicts in which there are deeply held values, for example, requires fairly sophisticated and creative patterns of relating. Frames may also lack well-roundedness in that they rush to impose order on the seeming chaos of conflict and indecision, and the results are inelegant solutions and neglected personal and psychological needs. Finally, a frame that is not well rounded cannot deal with perception and interaction as process. People try to "freeze-frame" data, positions, emotions, and ways of interacting so that people are locked in by the past.

A mature frame for negotiation, then, must accommodate deeply rooted conflict environments as well as simple disputes. It must amplify the negotiation and open it up to achieve elegance rather than purchase closure at the price of neglect of personal or emotional needs, oversimplification of the issues,

or unacceptable process. Finally, a rich negotiation frame must allow people to change and grow throughout the process.

The negotiator or mediator must develop the skills needed to analyze the language frames he or she uses, as well as the frames participants use; these skills are necessary to successfully diffuse unproductive frames and translate them into more generative, dynamic frames. Such intervention is not accomplished through force or deception on the part of the mediator or negotiator but through the transparent application of and invitation to more beneficial frames.

The Frames of Negotiation

To better understand and work with the language frames of negotiating parties, it is helpful to borrow terms from Burke's system of literary and social criticism (1959). Several patterns can be seen as problematic language and relational strategies for mediation and negotiation (see next section). Finally, the *comic frame* of reference provides potential for the well-roundedness that is necessary to address complex conflicts.

Problematic Frames. The problematic frames include the *tragic* frame, the *euphemistic* frame, and the *debunking* frame.

The Tragic Frame. Classic dramatic tragedy shows us a clear and defined frame that brings about tragic results, and this pattern of relating is often seen in parties in mediation. First, in dramatic tragedy, the hero is presented as the "cosmic" man who is battling, ultimately alone and for individual goals, against strong and hostile forces. The hero must be very competitive and very single-minded in his drive for victory against defeat.

Second, although the hero is required to fight the battle, he really has little control over the outcome. Outside forces (fate, the gods) beyond his control and more powerful than he always have the upper hand. The actor is locked into a tragic dilemma he did not create and over which he has little tangible control. So there is a feeling of fate, of having to play out the hand that was dealt rather than seeing his own contribution to the creation of the dilemma.

Third, the actors in a tragedy engage in extensive "magnification." The courage and the self-sacrificing and heroic nature of the protagonist are exaggerated, as is the evil and power of the "other side." There is no perspective-taking in the tragic frame. The hero sees in the other party no legitimate concerns, no valid but different point of view. He thus indulges in a narrow, self-satisfied view of himself in relation to others, leading to the "tragic flaw" that brings him down in the end. The heroic flaw—a set of limitations that lead him to make bad choices and have to pay the price—is usually *hubris*, loosely translated as *pride* but also referring to the excessive engrossment in the conflict that results from the self-centeredness of pride. One translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Cooper, 1932, p. xxii) refers to *hubris* as "wanton insolence within, wanton

violence without.” Although that may seem an overstatement for negotiation parties, most mediators have seen wantonness in the sense of unrestrained, undisciplined language and behavior and reckless disregard for others, and in allowing oneself to become engrossed in oneself and one’s issues as though they were the center of the universe. The violence is present in the sense of a party’s willingness to force her view and will on the other because of a belief in its absolute truth. Pride is thus a flaw that strongly affects those involved in the tragic drama. Even with such pride and its consequences, however, the hero manages to appear noble.

Finally, in tragedy, the tension of the particular conflict is deliberately exploited through manipulative language aiming at producing feelings of pity, anger, fear, and sympathy in the audience. The language also alienates the other party and contributes to a dynamic of force and disrespect. The tragic actor thus engages in a “tragic rhythm” of conflict—a desperate struggle, feelings of no control, bad choices, engrossment, forcing, and manipulation, and ultimately, tragic outcomes.

Parties in mediation and negotiation are often trapped in tragic frames of reference. They cannot get what they want and need because they cannot break out of their own tragic rhythms of language and behavior. And because communication is transactional (what each party does affects the other and creates change in himself), a pattern of relating exercised by one party can quickly become the broader frame for the entire communication context.

A mediator or negotiator may choose to interpret a tragic frame as a frame of operation for either or both parties when he sees a *consistent pattern* of any of the following behaviors:

- Consistently engages in good-bad polarization, telling his story in a way that represents himself as reasonable, victimized by the other, self-sacrificing, whereas the other party is selfish, malicious, and aggressive
- Uses forcing, threatening language and tactics
- Does not own responsibility for any contributions to the existing problems and makes statements that indicate engrossment in his own needs and in his own view of what the conflict is about
- Shows little indication of empathy for, or even awareness of, the views and needs of the other party
- Makes statements that attempt to provoke sympathy, pity, guilt, fear, or other strong emotions from the mediator or other party
- Has difficulty listening, attending to the other party
- Indicates feelings of lack of control by exaggerating the intention of those involved in the process—for example, judges, social workers, business competitors—to act against him

The tragic frame brought by one party may become the pattern of relating for the entire transaction if the responses of the other party correspond. The

work of the mediator in this situation is to loosen the hold of the tragic frame and try to co-construct with the parties a more helpful pattern of relating. Some ways a mediator may accomplish this include

1. Exploring the feelings, needs, and values behind the tragic language choices
2. Consistently reframing the language of Party A into less tragic responses, providing Party B a less tragic coparticipant in the conflict process
3. Calling attention to the party's successes in stating or clarifying important concerns, interests, options, need for information
4. Helping the party reconstruct the drama by providing safe opportunities for him to
 - A. "Try on" the perspective of Party B
 - B. Acknowledge Party B as something other than villain
 - C. Acknowledge himself as having contributed to the situation
5. Helping the party escape engrossment by encouraging him to talk about his life outside the conflict arena or about the needs and concerns of others related to the conflict

If the tragic frame (constructed through the language of one or both parties) is allowed to become the frame for the whole transaction, it may shape a number of important aspects of the mediation. It will undoubtedly affect the continued input of the parties because such a perspective tends to elicit a corresponding response, thus escalating the conflict. As the tragic negotiator is likely to view others involved in the process as people to fear or to outwit, he will probably listen less, disclose less, and manipulate more. People will not grow and change in the mediation process, as they feel locked into victim roles, unempowered and unrecognized, and unable to empower and recognize the other party in the conflict relationship. Finally, one would expect solution options to be limited, as only bad choices are expected, and creative, collaborative problem solving is difficult in a tragic frame. Thus, unless reframed, the language and behavior of parties within the tragic frame help bring about the negative outcome feared. It is, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Euphemistic Frame. One of the ways people cope with conflict is by deciding to look at it in a particular way. Sometimes that coping mechanism is the adoption of a mature, balanced way of defining the situation in a way that allows more creativity and flexibility than did one's original view. Other times, we engage in fanatical rationalizations: we narrow and "shallow" the focus. The euphemistic frame is just such a rationalization. It may accompany the tragic frame and is an attempt to eliminate the conflict by imposing the authority of a higher order, a natural or supernatural set of assumptions and requirements (Burke, 1959, 1970). So a structure of policy is in place or decisions are made from such motives as being "for God," "for justice," "for the corporate good," "because it's the natural order of things," and so forth. By imposing this kind

of explanation for the structures that produce or allow the problem, the euphemistic frame rigidly upholds the status quo. Although such a frame may derive from authentic religious or political beliefs, it may also function to secure more practical needs and interests. Either way, this pattern of relating takes for granted the specific outcomes. Such beliefs may be acceptable and helpful in individual living, but they may become problematic as a frame for negotiating conflict.

Sometimes the parties come to the table sharing a particular euphemistic frame, in which case conflict issues would seem more likely to be relational or procedural than substantive; both may seem to be the same predetermined outcomes. Although this frame may function well for parties in helping them make choices easily and meet some spiritual or emotional needs and interests, it may also function to deter them from pursuing other important interests. The mediator can amplify the frame by helping the parties fully explore their comfort level with making agreements that may deprive them of opportunities for rich and significant involvement with important people and systems. The parties can then consider the consequences of working within that frame and make decisions that are appropriate to their prioritization of concerns and values.

The mediator may choose to interpret a euphemistic frame when she sees a *consistent pattern* of behaviors such as the following:

- Excessively denies the value to himself of his demands, claiming the primary benefit for others
- Is excessively opposed to change, safeguarding all the previous structures and processes
- Participates in the mediation as if major decisions are a given and all that is negotiable are the specifics around those decisions
- Justifies his demands by citing authoritative sources (the law, God, most people)
- Offers as reasons for his requests primarily clichés and traditional wisdom

Some ways a mediator might work with the euphemistic frame include

1. Determining whether both parties share the frame
2. Amplifying the frame for both parties by
 - A. Using broader reframes that offer the parties the opportunity to consider a broader interpretation of the authoritative source
 - B. Exploring with the parties the positive and negative consequences of choices derived from the euphemistic frame and their comfort with those consequences
3. Finding ways to encourage the parties, if they do not share the frame, to consider the perspective of the other
4. Probing for deeper insight into what the status quo structure and processes provided the party who is opposing change, and encouraging his acknowledgment of those benefits to him

5. Helping parties consider whether there is some overall value they both hold beyond the euphemisms, whether some areas of value are more important to one party than to the other, or whether these differences are not mediable

The euphemistic pattern of relating is a conservative frame. Not only does it restrict the environment for change but it chooses language that conceals and denies legitimate interests of the parties, keeping people from being able to identify with each other's experience. Language is chosen for the purpose of persuasion and denial rather than for achieving that identity that brings about cooperation.

The Debunking Frame. This frame can be viewed as almost opposite to the euphemistic frame. Although the euphemistic frame posits higher motives and explanations for problem structures and behaviors, the debunking frame sees self-serving motives in everything (Burke, 1941, 1959, 1969, 1970). Generally referring to the exposing of false or exaggerated pretensions, the term *debunking* also is used to reflect the attacking or ridiculing of traditional or valued ideas. For the debunker, everything and everybody becomes a false representation about which he must discover and expose the truth. A debunking frame is a distrustful and iconoclastic frame of reference.

For the mediator or negotiator, the debunking frame is problematic because the debunker prefers to view the acts of the other (person, system, policy) simply as emanating from low ethical or moral motives, or as irrational. This provides him the ability to discount the other's humanity, his common experience, his emotions, all as irrelevant, encouraging engrossment in his own needs and point of view. The ability to move participants into perspective-taking is a necessity in working with this frame, providing participants the opportunity to define the other as possibly mistaken but not necessarily evil or irrational, given the other's frame of reference.

The debunking frame is also a problem because the debunker uses language aggressively and restrictively, and then must manipulate language to accomplish its goals within those restrictions. A parent in a divorce mediation, for example, might insist that her time with the children is being infringed on by frequent schedule changes and therefore no changes will be allowed in the future. However, when she discovers her own need for flexibility, she may suggest that schedules might be *updated* under special circumstances. (In political spin, for example, people are never mistaken nor have they changed positions—their former statements simply become “nonoperative.”) A debunking frame requires blatant manipulation of language to achieve solutions within the narrow boundaries it draws, making any kind of creative cooperation very difficult.

Finally, the debunking frame is problematic because in systematically attributing the other's statements, interests, and view of the conflict to low motives or irrationality, the debunker joins the debunked in an environment

of noncommunity. The party in mediation who is successful in predominating with the debunking frame deprives herself of opportunity, perhaps for support, perhaps for personal growth, and contributes to a culture of division.

The mediator may choose to interpret a debunking frame when he sees one or more of the parties engaging in a *consistent pattern* of several of the following behaviors:

Repeatedly and excessively implies that there are hidden reasons behind such things as the other party's claims, the mediation process, or in the actions of those in related legal, social, business systems

Ridicules or belittles the values or beliefs of the other party

Wants to draw the lines of agreement very rigidly for the other party but consistently creates loopholes for himself

Frames common behavior of both parties in a positive way for himself and in a negative way for the other

Wants excessive change, rejecting anything in the past as unacceptable

Some ways a mediator might choose to address a debunking frame include

Exploring with each of the parties the legitimacy of Party A's concerns about interests not on the table

Creating an opportunity for safe perspective-taking by inviting the debunking party to consider the validity of the other's view in a hypothetical sense

Providing an opportunity for each party to hear in depth the needs and interests of the other and to articulate and address those concerns

Helping the debunking party to clarify distinctions he is making between his framing of his own and the other's behavior

Determining the comfort level of both parties with the degree of flexibility in any agreement and attempting to build in qualifications and procedures for exceptions if necessary

The debunking frame is an aggressive and arrogant frame and is destructive because it tears away the opportunity for trust.

The Comic or Hopeful Frame. In contrast particularly with the tragic frame and its cycle of division and destruction, the comic frame as a pattern of relating is one that offers hope (Burke, 1959, 1970; Rueckert, 1994). It has potential to break out of the tragic rhythm and both build identification and make one aware of subtle ways in which negative, controlling identifications are being built. The comic frame is about seeing ourselves behave and being aware of our choices in the language we choose to define a situation or person, the way we choose to see and tell the drama, and in the action we take. It is also about being sophisticated in seeing those aspects in the language of others. The comic frame is a frame of self-reflection, of analysis, of responsibility, and of humility.

This frame is mature, generative, and strong; thus it has the potential to deal with broad and deep levels of conflict. There are several important dimensions of the comic frame, and these are discussed in the sections to follow.

Assumption of the Ability to Change. The comic frame is hopeful because it assumes people can change, situations can change, systems can change. Outcomes rest not in the hands of outside forces but in the hands of people working with people. Everything is in process; there is no “final outcome.” People can make better choices than they have made in the past, and those choices can affect, though not totally control, the outcomes of their situations. Additionally, this frame implies belief that others can change—that people who have power to influence our lives can be affected by our actions and our language.

This aspect of the comic frame is seen in a number of ways in mediation. The mediator encourages the belief of the parties in their ability, with support, to negotiate effectively, of the possibility that, with support, the other party may be somewhat reasonable this time, that, with support, the parties can solve this themselves, and that neither is stuck in arbitrary positions taken or imposed in the past.

Sometimes the parties cannot hear the “news of difference” (evidence of change) for themselves or for the other person. Gregory Bateson wrote that all perception is simply “news of difference.” A well-known quote in the social sciences is Korzybski’s statement that “a map is not the territory it represents” (meaning that our perception or our framing of something is not the thing itself). Expanding that thought, Bateson argued that the metaphorical bridge between the map and the territory is “difference.” For example, a hill that is located on a mapped plot of land is not reflected on that map until it is perceived to be high enough and significantly different enough from the terrain in which it stands to be called a mountain. Bateson says it is the news of difference, the dawning of perception of difference, that moves something from the territory of reality to the map of perception. This is very subjective in the sense that each person will notice difference at a different point along the continuum from territory to map in any given situation, as each will be taking different things into account.

The framing of difference, of change, (and ultimately of hope) is an important role of the mediator. Sometimes the parties cannot hear the news of difference for themselves or for the other person. The other party may be offering a compliment or disclosing new information on what’s important to him or hinting at some movement on a position. Additionally, the party’s own feelings and needs may be undergoing some change, but change remains unperceived, unacknowledged, even to himself. If the parties are operating out of the tragic frame of reference or out of a debunking frame (convinced that they know the other’s motives and that those motives are bad), the journey from the news of difference to the territory of reality to the map of perception will be tedious.

Rhetorically moving that difference from the territory to the map so that parties can perceive change and make adjustments is an important aspect of comic framing. Mediators may accomplish this by

Punctuating important input from the parties, possibly through simple restatement ("Just to be sure I understand what you're saying. . . .")

Asking one party to state his understanding of what the other party is saying, probing more in depth for interests (even if he already has a good grasp on them) so that the parties can hear each other's dramatic narrative more clearly

Meeting privately with the parties for a frank discussion of the news of difference the mediator is hearing

Asking the parties directly if they heard anything different than they had heard before (Bush and Folger, 1994, p. 266)

In a recent divorce mediation, one of the parties insisted that a particular formula for property division be applied because it provided adequate compensation to him for a property claim the other had made in anger earlier in the dispute but no longer wanted. The mediator acknowledged the party's desire for consistency in the negotiations and for a fair distribution of the assets (a definitional reframe, Mayer's reframing categories, 1997) and then asked the other party to talk about his thinking when he made the original claim and why that no longer worked for him. The mediator then commented that in mediation, parties did not have to be bound by things that happened in the past, that the other party was no longer making those demands, and that Party B, too, had the freedom and opportunity to look at what he really needed now and for his future (language designed to establish and sustain the ability to change aspect of the comic frame).

Change in the View of Other. Another important defining characteristic of the comic frame is that it changes the conception of the other participant in the conflict from villain to fool. As Burke (1959) said:

The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy [p. 41].

If we define someone as mistaken or ignorant, we invite ourselves to the action of correcting. If we define someone as vicious or criminal or immoral, we invite ourselves to punish. A comic frame promotes integration by defining a person in a way that allows us to bring him back into the community rather than placing him in a state of division.

To help a party in negotiation frame the other party as someone lacking understanding rather than as a villain, a mediator may ask how each party saw an event or a relationship, how he remembers it, what was significant or problematic to him about it, and so on. This language is designed to encourage among parties an understanding of each of their perceptions as points of view rather than absolute reality.

When the mediator asks a party to "talk more about your decision to do X," she is again promoting that portion of the comic frame that helps each party view the other's actions as perhaps unacceptable but not totally unreasonable, given the way he sees it. (This is especially important when working to dislodge a debunking frame, since it provides opportunity to understand and accept motives as legitimate.)

The mediator may ask the parties directly to be reflective, to talk or perhaps write about how this would appear to them if they were the other party.

Specific reframes of parties' statements can also help to sustain this portion of the comic frame. For example, statements from Party A like "I want her to quit nagging at me" and "She has to stop trying to tell me how to do everything for the kids" might be reframed to state, "You want to feel respected as a capable parent." The reframes offer Party B a view of Party A's demands that stem from something other than uncooperativeness and aggressiveness. Thus they help construct for Party B a more hopeful view of Party A. They also help Party A see himself as reasonable and cooperative and capable of articulating his point of view.

The "Masks" of Cooperation. In addition to helping the parties see the other as someone with whom they disagree rather than as a villain, the mediator must work to help each party define himself as a cooperative, good-faith participant in the conflict process. Erving Goffman (1959) believed that people spend a lot of time and energy creating and defending their presentation of self—their "masks" that reflect how they want to be seen and, usually, how they legitimately see themselves. They cannot continue to define themselves in that way if the people with whom they interact do not accept them in that role. In a negotiation situation, people often see themselves as reasonable and cooperative while viewing the other as aggressive and noncooperative. It may be difficult for the mediator to help the party "hold the mask in place," particularly when the party's language and behavior in the negotiations involve hostile statements and excessively self-interested demands.

From a dramatic perspective, the mediator does not need to determine which mask is "real." Instead, the mediator would understand the different masks as legitimate sides of a person's feelings and would work to rhetorically construct or enhance the mask that is most helpful to positive negotiation (also discussed by Cochran, 1994, p. 25). The mediator may try to hold the mask (of reasonable, cooperative person) in place, even when a party's behavior departs from the mask, hoping to help the party redefine himself and act in the direction of the mask.

The mediator may accomplish this through definitional and detoxification reframes to help the parties state their concerns in respectful and reasonable ways, or he may make a point of acknowledging the positive contributions of the party to the conflict process.

There may also, however, be times when the mediator might, probably in caucus, choose to pull the mask away. Although the mediator might simply identify the uncooperative behavior and discuss with the party whether such behavior is actually in his best interests, what the mediator is doing with such language is saying, "I don't accept the mask."

Whichever approach the mediator chooses to take, if the mediator herself is operating out of a comic frame, she needs to be aware of her choice of strategies as a judgment call rather than as "telling it like it is."

Human Being in Society. Whereas the tragic frame focuses on the "cosmic" individual, alone against all odds, the focus of the comic frame is the human being in society. A comic actor is aware of and acts in connection with community. Systems theory, as it has been interpreted in family psychology (family systems theory) and to some degree in organizational behavior (although much of that application is still fairly causal in orientation), holds that most relevant systems are much larger than we think. In other words, we tend to define *self* and *world* very narrowly, when in fact, there is a much wider set of people, circumstances, needs, and so on, that affect us and that, in turn, we affect. What is important in systems theory is not so much what each person in the system is doing but how each part is interacting with the others. Such a perspective results less in a search for root causes of behavior or problems and more in analysis of patterns of interaction. A comic frame takes into account that people systems are transactional and complex and that work with such systems requires a broad, well-rounded frame.

For the mediator or negotiator, any time we can reframe to focus on the larger system, or the bigger picture, we give ourselves and the parties several advantages and also introduce some problems. First, this perspective is based on the concept of interdependencies. By assessing the level of the interdependencies and reframing toward that, we expand the potential for identification and cooperation. By inviting parties to go outside the "I" boundaries to work together *with* the system *for* the system, we also enlarge the potential for creativity. There is also a limiting effect, however, in that we are establishing systemic or communal goals for that creativity.

Second, this frame is holistic, not reductionistic. In functioning to support this aspect of the frame, the mediator might, for example, help the parties *define the problem in the interaction of the parties rather than with either party*. Additionally, the mediator might reshape individual concerns in light of their *relevance to the broader system* or at a *greater level of generality*. A party's narrative of blaming the other, then, can be reframed into a descriptive but nonevaluative summary of a past circumstance or arrangement that does not meet the needs of one or both of the parties in today's situation.

Third, this attempt of the mediator or negotiator to broaden the system, to employ an amplifying rather than reductive frame, often makes underlying interests and structures clearer. Such clarity can be very helpful in that awareness of both deeper interests and relevant structural constraints can open up the range of solution options. Conversely, it often brings about some despair among the parties, since the "struggle" of the negotiation may get worse before it gets better. Parties may say things like, "That's never been an issue *before*," sometimes meaning, "I don't want it to be an issue *now*." Discussion of previously undiscussable or unacknowledged issues may be painful and certainly adds to the work involved in the negotiation.

Values Discourse. The comic frame is based on discourse. Whereas the tragic frame pits the power of the hero in action against the power of the hostile forces, the comic frame values talk. The plots are advanced and resolved through criticism (analysis of language), dialogue, debate, and discussion. The frame is civilized because people rely on talk to negotiate and correct. People who work well in this frame sustained by talk are people who understand the creative nature of language and emphasize dialogic communication.

To understand the creative nature of language is to comprehend the importance of our language and messages in shaping our own thought and in contributing to the relationships and situations we negotiate with others. The ability to analyze the perspective that both underlies and is created by one's choice of metaphors, for example, allows a person to consider whether that metaphor is unnecessarily manipulative or constitutes harmful framing of one's own thinking or the thinking of others.

It is similarly important to a frame that values talk to understand the ways in which literal, myopic use and interpretations of language lead us into tragic understandings and outcomes. Anyone who has heard an "Aggie" joke knows that the humor (and the tragic outcome for the Aggie) derives from literal, prosaic thinking. (Consider, for example, the Aggie who went big game hunting. He bent over to examine the tracks, and the train hit him.) Literalism is dangerous. Although it may simply lead us down unproductive roads, it may also beguile us into illusionary expectations and worldviews that set up a tragic cycle. A hopeful frame opens up possibilities by giving behaviors, situations, and people multiple names (interpretations) rather than oversimplifying and thus relegating to a single, definitive label. A person operating from a comic frame will be reflective in his language of naming, taking responsibility for his choice of language use and interpretation, always questioning his own terminology. He will also be analytic in listening to the language of others, examining and noting implications of the symbolism.

Dialogic communication seems an important part of this component of the comic frame. If we assume the transactive nature of communication, we understand communication to be a process in which meaning is created together, between the individuals, and in a context rather than the more traditional view of communication as the meaning of the sender being transferred to the receiver.

In some consonance with this perspective, dialogic theory assumes that one's identity and one's communication does not really exist within oneself but in "the between" of relationships (Buber, 1958, pp. 28–29). The "I-It" relationship described by Martin Buber is one in which a human being sees another as static, measured, predictable, and accounted for. In dramatistic terms, we would say one sees the other with one name (oversimplified). In addition, this way of viewing others implies that they are things to be manipulated and persuaded through language to one's own ends.

In contrast, Buber (1958) describes the I-You relationship as one in which a person interprets and responds to the other as a unique, dynamic individual. In our dramatistic terms, we see the other as uncontainable by literalism. In each of us there are multiple names, opportunities for different behavior. The purpose of communication, given this understanding, is to participate in the "between," to participate in this relationship for its own sake (p. 8). Listening is for the purpose of understanding, not for the purpose of refuting or defeating the other's point of view.

Charitable, not Gullible. The fact that the comic frame gives the other person the benefit of the doubt, naming them, initially, to be mistaken rather than evil does not imply that one must ignore the fact that some people may be villains. They are perhaps more rare than we think, and sometimes we help create them as villains by our language and behavior in the relationship. Working in the comic frame implies careful analysis of the language of others so that people can be admonished and corrected (Burke, 1959). Robert Axelrod (1984) states that there are always "non-cooperators" willing to take advantage of cooperators, and that cooperators cannot prosper in a world without other cooperators. It is not always in our best interests to help people cooperate, for example, in situations where that cooperation produces such results as crime, violence, and war. But assuming that we understand the term *cooperation* to refer to some real sense of positive collaboration, the comic frame attempts to define an environment in which noncooperators are disadvantaged and in which they have opportunity to change.

Axelrod believes, drawing on observations from game theory and from the evolution of cooperation in biological systems, that people should not be unconditionally cooperative because such behavior, in game theory research, encourages exploitive strategies. Instead, people should reciprocate uncooperative behavior ("defecting"), then "forgiving" and returning to cooperative behavior as soon as the other party returns to cooperation. This is difficult to apply because, from a transactional perspective, it is difficult to know which party defected first and which simply reciprocated the uncooperative behavior. Additionally, as T. L. (The Lord) says to Satan in Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*, "It's more complicated than that" (1970, p. 312). Parties in conflict often see themselves in a defensive posture and the other in an offensive posture. So "cooperation" and "defection" are to some extent in the eye of the egocentric beholder.

Nevertheless, a pattern of consistent cooperation on the part of one party, coupled with consistent noncooperation (as interpreted or "named" by the mediator or one or both of the parties), may create and reflect a pattern of power and dominance that shapes the negotiation or mediation process. The question of the responsibility of the mediator to address that power balance is one about which there is strong disagreement in the field. Depending on one's point of view, the role of the mediator might involve helping the parties make gestures of good faith that seem developmental and appropriate to the negotiation relationship, playing a role in admonishing bad-faith behavior, or simply raising the issue of the pattern that seems to be emerging. It is a question that must continue to be seriously considered as we try to sustain a hopeful frame in which participants operate in good faith and expect the same from others, but take responsibility for not blindly leaving their interests dependent on the good faith of the other conflict participants.

Summary

The successful negotiation of complex issues requires a frame that is adequately well rounded. Specifically, a rich negotiation frame must be able to accommodate a wide range of conflict types and levels. It must strengthen and open up the negotiation rather than oversimplify. It must provide opportunity for people to grow and change and for outcomes to always be "in progress." In contrast to several problematic frames (the tragic frame, the euphemistic frame, and the debunking frame), the comic or hopeful frame is one with this potential. A comic frame monitors the symbols by which others define situations and bring about identification; at the same time, it promotes the participants' awareness of their own contributions in the processes of conflict and cooperation. The comic frame promotes belief in process and change and promotes constant reexamination of self, of language, and of motives. It is a pattern of relating that encourages awareness of connection and responsibility to community. The comic frame relies on talk to understand, to be understood, to admonish, and to be admonished. Finally, although it expects the good faith of others and gives the benefit of the doubt, it is a frame of responsibility, not naivete.

Conclusions

The field of conflict resolution is gaining maturity. We are recognizing our need to function at a higher level of conceptualization, to be reflective in our practice, to work out of theory, and to generate theory from our experience. At the same time, we want to amplify our ability to work with broader and deeper contexts of conflict and to raise our expectations of what we can accomplish.

In a recent address to the Academy of Family Mediators (1998), John Paul Lederach stated his belief that the most important thing we do as conflict

professionals is to reintroduce hope into the conflict process. If we accept this definition of our purpose at any significant level, it would seem important to understand and recognize language and behaviors that create and sustain patterns of hopelessness in conflict and those that have potential to create and sustain hope. The tragic and comic frames perspective is offered as a way of thinking more deeply about these issues and of working more effectively in conflict processes.

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